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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 002924

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KWBG](#) [IS](#) [ISRAELI](#) [PALESTINIAN](#) [AFFAIRS](#) [GAZA](#) [DISENGAGEMENT](#)

SUBJECT: MKS TO CODEL FRIST: SKEPTICISM ABOUNDS

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin and Chairman of the Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee Yuval Steinetz told Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist May 2 that PM Sharon would be "making a mistake" if he allows Egyptian troops to deploy along the Gaza-Egypt and the Israel-Egypt borders. Himself a disengagement opponent, Rivlin said that, although the majority of Israelis support Israel's withdrawal from Gaza and parts of the northern West Bank, there will be a backlash once the populace realizes that they might also have to give up settlements that are widely viewed by Israelis as intrinsically a part of Jerusalem. Rivlin and Steinetz both expressed what they called the GOI's disappointment with PA President Mahmud Abbas's failure to disarm terrorist groups as well as the codification of that failure in the agreement reached with the factions in Cairo allowing them to keep their weapons. Rivlin predicted that Abbas is too weak to negotiate on behalf of the Palestinians, while Steinetz compared Abbas to Arafat, who also allowed militant groups to re-arm in the mid-1990s rather than completing their destruction. End Summary.

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Skeptical of Disengagement, ...  
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12. (C) Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, accompanied by staff members Mark Esper, Nick Smith, and Col. Michael Barbero, met May 2 with Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin and head of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee Yuval Steinetz. The Ambassador and Poloff (notetaker) also attended. Rivlin opened the meeting by stating that, although "the vast majority" of the Israeli public support PM Sharon's plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and parts of the northern West Bank, he believes the population will ultimately view the PM's plan as a mistake -- once it sinks in that Israel may also have to give up Jerusalem neighborhoods that most Israelis think of as intrinsically part of Israel, rather than as "settlements" per se.

13. (C) Asked if the evacuation could actually lead to civil war, Rivlin replied that he was doing everything in his power to prevent just that. "If we knew where we were going after Gaza," he said, "it would be better." Israeli attitudes towards the West Bank settlements are "totally different" than towards those in Gaza, Rivlin said. Steinetz said that he had supported the disengagement plan when it was unilateral. Now, however, Israel and the PA are supposed to be back on the roadmap, he continued, and the Europeans are trying to get Israel to ignore the Palestinians' obligations under the first phase. While he said he did not think the situation would lead to civil war, Steinetz stressed that the situation is very difficult for Israel. Rivlin's preference is to live "along with" the Palestinians, so long as Israel retains its fundamental character as a Jewish state. Many Israelis, however, view a Palestinian state alongside an Israeli state as a danger, he said. Rivlin said he agreed, adding that if there is an actual border between Palestinians and Israelis, there would inevitably be war.

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...Of Abu Mazen, ...  
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14. (C) Noting that it had been hard to convince people, especially the Europeans, that Arafat was a terrorist and thus an obstacle, Rivlin opined that President Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) is headed down the same road of compromise with terror as Arafat had in the past. Rivlin said that Abbas has "failed to deliver the goods," and that Israel is intensely disappointed, doubting even that Abbas can hold his people together. The fact that the militant groups agreed only to a period of quiet, as opposed to a cease-fire, is indicative of the President's weakness, Rivlin said. Abbas is not, in Rivlin's view, the person who will be able to negotiate on the difficult final status subjects of refugees, permanent borders and Jerusalem. Rivlin opined that Abbas will be able to keep his position as PA president "only if we (Israel) meet his every demand." Otherwise his government will crumble.

15. (C) When asked, in light of this pessimistic assessment of President Abbas' chances for political survival, what Israel could do to help Abbas, Rivlin replied that any concessions from Israel while it remains engaged in the fight against terror have ultimately been unproductive. Furthermore, Israel has already made a number of concessions -- now it is the turn of the Palestinians, who need to take some concrete steps in order to build Israeli confidence in them. Although he expressed confidence that most Palestinians want peace, Rivlin said, the national movements remained problematic.

16. (C) Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Yuval Steinetz agreed, adding that, until President Abbas met with militant leaders in Cairo, the GOI had remained hopeful. During his campaign, for example, Steinetz recalled that Abbas had repeatedly promised to dismantle terrorist organizations and unauthorized militias, as called for under the roadmap. Since Cairo, however, things have clearly been going in the opposite direction, Steinetz said, with President Abbas having agreed that the organizations would not be disarmed. Israeli intelligence, Steinetz continued, is reporting that the militant groups are using the time of quiet to recover, a development similar to what occurred with Yasir Arafat in the mid-1990s.

17. (C) In response to the Senator's question as to what the U.S. could do to help, Rivlin said unequivocally that the U.S. must continue to insist that there be no more terror -- even the idea of terror in Palestinian society had to go. Rivlin stressed that, as the U.S. had done with Syria, the U.S. must maintain a consistent refrain opposing terror. Steinetz concurred, adding that there are no acceptable compromises on this subject and no valid shortcuts to disarming the terror groups.

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...and Last, But By No Means Least, Skeptical of Egypt  
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18. (C) Turning to one of his favorite themes, Steinetz said that Lebanese organizations as well as Iran and Syria supply most of the weapons to the Palestinians, but that, regardless of place of origin, some 90% of all weapons and explosives come into Palestinians hands via Egypt. Steinetz said that Egypt is "doing nothing" in response. Furthermore, the GOE is trying to "blackmail" Israel into accepting the deployment of two Egyptian battalions along the Egypt-Gaza border and another three armored infantry brigades along the Egypt-Israel border. Some variant of this proposal is currently being debated in the Knesset, Steinetz said, calling it the "beginning of the end of demilitarization." Sharon, Steinetz concluded, needs convincing that this is a bad idea.

19. (C) Steinetz urged Senator Frist to recommend that the U.S. use its economic and military aid to pressure Egypt into backing away from what Steinetz termed its clear policy of allowing the Palestinians to re-arm so that they and Israel can "bleed together." Pressing his point, Steinetz said that Egypt is doing two things. First, the GOE allows arms to enter the territories through Egypt. Egypt, Steinetz said, imprisons or even executes individuals who smuggle weapons into Egypt, yet the GOE "does nothing" against those who smuggle weapons out of Egypt. Second, Steinetz maintained that the GOE is pressuring President Abbas into allowing the factions to continue to exist, adding that the GOE had reined in Arafat similarly in the mid-90's when the PA had cracked down on Hamas.

110. (C) Rivlin echoed Steinetz's skepticism regarding Egypt, saying that he does not believe that the Egyptians are ready to "get involved seriously" in Palestinian affairs. If they were, Rivlin maintained, they would be encouraging Abbas to take on the militant groups, instead of the opposite. Furthermore, allowing the Egyptians to deploy along the Israel-Egypt border could also have implications for the Golan Heights: Syria could well make the same demand, in an area where there is only the width of the Sea of Galilee rather than the entire Sinai peninsula dividing the parties.

111. (U) CODEL Frist did not clear this message.

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KURTZER